



D'var Torah – Pesach day one, April 23, 2024

By Morry Safer

Shalom Y'all and Chag Sameach!

My name is Morry Safer and for those unfamiliar with my background, I was raised in Jacksonville, Florida. My father, who is here visiting for the holiday, was also raised in Jacksonville, Florida. My grandfather, similarly, was raised in Jacksonville. My grandmother was not raised in Jacksonville - she grew up across the state in Pensacola, Florida.

On the Safer side of the family, I'm a fourth-generation Floridian – with family roots in north Florida communities – the only areas of Florida inhabitable before the invention of air conditioning. For many people, their familiarity with my hometown of Jacksonville ends as they go speeding through town on I-95 on their way to visit relatives in Boca Raton or Fort Lauderdale.

Jacksonville was incorporated as a city in 1832, the first documented organized Jewish community began in the 1880s and my extended Safer family immigrated from Lithuania to serve the Jewish community around the turn of the 20th century. Jacksonville is a culturally southern city - in many ways, it has more in common with Savannah and Atlanta than it does with Miami and Fort Lauderdale. To paraphrase the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life in Jackson, Mississippi, my family *is* a Southern Jewish Experience.

While the current Jewish community in the United States is demographically focused on the Northeast, colonial and early American Jews were much more surprisingly distributed. Many are familiar with George Washington's letter to the Touro Synagogue in Rhode Island, or Haym Solomon's revolutionary fundraising in New York City and Philadelphia, but would be surprised to learn that in 1800, 20% of the US Jewish population lived south of the Mason-Dixon line and the largest Jewish community in the United States was in Charleston, South Carolina thanks to a colonial charter and then state Constitution which protected religious freedom. The first three Jewish senators serving in the 1800s represented the states of Florida and Louisiana. About 30 percent of all Jews who fought in the Civil War fought for the Confederacy.

And for the first 90 years of the American Jewish experience, many family seders were celebrated in homes in New Orleans, Richmond, Mobile, Savannah, and Charleston – prepared extensively by the Blacks enslaved by those Jewish families. Recitations of “Avadim Hayyinu” – we were once slaves – were unquestioned as observances of the Passover holiday as our uniquely-Jewish Zman Cheiruteinu, the season of our Freedom divorced from the very-present enslavement of Blacks.

As we are all aware, despite the focus on Yetiyat Mitzrayim and our transition from slavery to freedom as the formative event of the Jewish people, what follows in the Torah is not the abolition of slavery but specifically the legislation of a two tiered system of slavery mitzvot - one set governing Jewish slaves and another governing non-Jewish slaves.

I was watching a debate on YouTube between atheist pop-philosopher Alex O'Connor and conservative

commentator and Jewish public figure Ben Shapiro about the morality of religion. O'Connor fundamentally criticized any bible-based theology as immoral due to its support and propagation of the institution of slavery. Shapiro rebutted that the Torah arrived in a world culture of rampant, cruel slavery and while slavery is specifically permitted in the Torah, it is presented with a set of ethical commands regarding slave ownership, thus slowly steering a society in no way prepared to deal with our modern notions of universal freedom. I suspect that many of these similar ethical arguments would have been considered by Confederate Jews as they differentiated between their own celebration of freedom and their simultaneous enslavement of others.

My family did not live in the South prior to the Emancipation of the Enslaved Blacks. We did not, to my knowledge, directly participate in the American Slave Economy. But it is not lost on me that the generational wealth of all of the early American Jewish communities was built, directly and indirectly on the backs of the Black slaves, and specifically the communities of the earliest Southern Jews benefited directly and unfairly from the enterprise of Black slavery.

As you've likely already surmised, I'm proud of my southern Jewish roots and I have many wonderful things to say about the surprising vibrancy and affordability of growing up Jewish in Jacksonville. But I have also spent a lot of time processing my post-Civil Rights Era Southern education, both Jewish and secular, especially around the values of the holiday of Passover.

By the time I was born, the Jewish community of Jacksonville had moved from the urban core of the city, to expansive suburbanized neighborhoods redeveloped on top of the up-river plantation homesteads. Family time after Shabbat dinner at my grandparents house would be spent playing in their rumpus room – which in years previous had provided the unfinished, separate bathroom facilities for the hired help. My most regular interactions with any Blacks within my Jewish bubble in our largely white suburb, were with housekeepers and Synagogue kitchen and maintenance staff who still commuted great distances from their own post-segregated neighborhoods.

But within these shadows of past Southern history, the Passover traditions I was taught strongly reflected the universality of the Yetziyat Mitzrayim experience. Our Day School model seders, which through the school attendance of my brother and my younger cousins would form the core traditions of our Safer family seder for nearly 20 years, included the traditional instructions of the Mishnah interspersed with the lessons of the Civil Rights movement.

The imagery of the Exodus from Egypt as reflected in the melodies of the African American spiritual "Go Down Moses" and Peter, Paul and Mary's "Man Come Into Egypt" were as familiar to us as those enumerated in the Dayeinu. The tunes of Echad Mi Yodeah and Chad Gadya were sung as was an occasional chorus of "We Shall Overcome". The teachings of Rabban Gamliel and Hillel were supplemented with those of Martin Luther King, citing the Prophet Amos: "we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."

In the thirty years since I graduated high school and left Jacksonville, I've been an outsider witnessing a city in transformation continuing to deal with its past. The city, now with more than one million people, continues to become more cosmopolitan, and real reckoning and change continues, perhaps more slowly than it should. The urban magnet public schools which my brother and I attended, named after Lincoln's Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and locally-born civil-rights activist James Weldon Johnson, were created in traditionally Black neighborhoods under the Federal enforcement of desegregated bussing - Federal mandates which were shamefully still required through my high-school graduation.

The suburban schools of the district carried the names of Confederate leaders such as Robert E Lee, Stonewall Jackson, Jefferson Davis, and Nathan Bedford Forrest until as recently as three years ago. But such public pride in the Confederacy is waning. As Martin Luther King is oft quoted: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice".

With this background in mind, it is not surprising that as an adult, I continue to struggle with my own inherent tension between a seder that focuses on the foundational freedom of the Jewish people versus the praise and pursuit of universal freedom for all. But as the American Jewish community continues to diversify, I've been loudly hearing a new voice – a growing population of Jews of Color whose own personal history simultaneously tells the freedom story of an Ancient Israelite people while still actively dealing with the scars of their enslaved family members freed only in recent generations.

For many, the songs of the American slaves and the fighting pronouncements of the Civil Rights Movements are not reflections of a universal experience, but represent the very unique struggle of the Black community in the United States. While based on a shared Biblical heritage, the Passover inclusion, for example, of "Go Down Moses" is seen by some as a cultural appropriation of the legacy of the struggle of Enslaved Blacks and their descendants. In such a framework, there is a strong risk of correlating the mythological impact of the Jewish slave experience with the very real ongoing impact of slavery on the American Black community.

I hear this voice also. And I struggle further.

So, as I personally reflect this morning on Zman Cheiruteinu – the Season of Our Freedom:

First, I celebrate today Yetziyat Mitzrayim as the foundational event in the unique Jewish relationship with Hashem, the beginning of our people's special partnership with ethical godliness. Second, I recognize the strong symbolism of Yetziyat Mitzrayim as an inspirational narrative toward universal freedom for all those who are enslaved - next year may they be free - and may we be inspired by the stories we tell in the Haggadah to actively fight against the enslavement of peoples around the globe. And Third, I aspire that our retelling of our own very personal experience of Yetziyat Mitzrayim be a reminder to appreciate and make space for the unique freedom stories of those around us and sensitize us to the ongoing impacts of enslavement and the long transition of all to true freedom in our modern society.

Eilu v'Eilu. V'Eilu.

Chag Sameach.